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It's no secret, CIA says nothing

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It could be they're confident after a recent court victory against Syracuse University's student newspaper.

Perhaps they're just following orders. Or maybe they're worried about their jobs and safety.

But don't count on finding out much about the local branch of the Central Intelligence Agency. They may tell you they're the CIA. But that's about all they'll tell you.

Their telephone number is listed in the white and blue pages of the phone book. But if you call, you're likely to get a man who will tell you he can't tell you anything — his name, where his office is, what his office does.

He'll tell you to call the CIA public relations office in Washington, D.C.

They'll go him one better. They'll say that even though you can reach the Syracuse CIA with a local call, the office may not actually be in Syracuse at all.

But it is. In Room 1341, at the northwest

corner of the 13th floor of the James M. Hanley Federal Building.

Thinking of dropping by?

A Syracuse Newspapers photographer did last Thursday. He stood in the hallway, camera ready, waiting outside the unmarked door to see if anyone would come out.

He lasted 20 minutes, before two security guards "escorted" him out of the building, telling him the 13th floor was "a sensitive area" and he wasn't allowed to be there.

But earlier in the week a reporter walked up to the foreboding door, which bears a mysterious peephole.

A woman answered the buzzer through an intercom.

"I'm looking for the CIA office," the reporter said. "Is this it?"

"I'll get you the number," the woman replied. After a long pause, she recited the telephone number.

"I have that, but can you tell me where the office is?"

"No, I don't know where it is."

"Then who are you?"

"The Army."

A couple of men who work down the hall were amused by that story.

"They're giving you that line, huh?" joked one.

What lies behind the door is conjecture. But one source gave a hint about what's inside. There are several rooms to the office, and it's more than a one- or two-person operation. But there's one room that no one, but no one, from the outside world is allowed in.

The Syracuse branch of the CIA, like other branches, interviews local people — notably business people and academicians — who travel abroad, especially to communist countries. The interviewees are guaranteed confidentiality.

And not every metropolitan area has a local CIA phone number, according to Washington-based CIA spokeswoman Patti Volz.

But the information she gave was limited. All else she would say is that the Syracuse outfit is a "field" office, rather than a "recruiting" office, meaning it's engaged in the work of gathering information "U.S. citizens deem of national security interest."